

Lake Winnebago 2005 Refill Strategy Conference Call Notes

1. **Introduction.** The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (USACE), Detroit District held its Lake Winnebago Refill Strategy conference call on 7 April 2005. The call began at approximately 9:30 a.m. CDT with Mr. Phil Ross beginning with self-introductions. A list of participants is located at the end of this document.
2. **Presentation of the Agenda.** Mr. Ross followed up with a brief introduction to the agenda and explained that the purpose of the call was to discuss basin conditions, expected spring / summer conditions, and Lake Winnebago Refill Strategy. He then gave a detailed description of the agenda and described how topics on the agenda would be covered.
3. **Basin Conditions since 5 January 2005.** Mr. Dan Rudebeck of the Lake Poygan Sportsman's Club stated that there was good flow in the upper river basin in the vicinity of Shiocton and the marshes were open. He further said that based on information from Mr. Ron Brooke, a Chief Fishery Biologist from Oshkosh, the walleyes had begun to move into the spawning marshes at both New London and Shiocton. With the current conditions, walleyes may complete their spawning by Sunday or Monday (April 11-12), and begin moving back down river. The perch are spawning and they could complete spawning within a week and a half. Other pan fish will probably move according to their own cycles, including the bass.
 - a. **Lake Winnebago water levels.** Mr. Ross of the USACE reported that water levels were above plan, nearing long-term average. So far water levels have increased 0.6 ft since the winter thaw began.
 - b. **Snow Pack.** The Snow Water Equivalence (SWE) in the snow pack for the Fox-Wolf-Winnebago Basin was comparable to last year's values, which were above average. A significant supply from snow melt is expected.
 - c. **Ice Cover.** Mr. Art Techlow, Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources (WDNR) stated that 1/3 of the lake is open (ice-free) and that ice conditions are weakening. The southern portion of Lake Winnebago is ice free. The first strong wind should break up the ice completely. The upper lakes are open. According to Mr. Rudebeck the marshes on Lake Poygan are open along the edge of the lake with some pockets of ice in shaded portions of the lake.
 - d. **River Flows.** Mr. Bruce Gomm of Kaukauna Utilities reported river flows have been steady through late winter and early spring, which has been good for their operations.

4. **Expected spring and summer conditions.** Mr. Keith Kompoltowicz of the USACE reported that for the short-term we're facing fairly dry conditions through April 16, 2005. Several locations around the Great Lakes regions are reporting rainfall deficits.
5. **Refill Discussion.** Mr. Ross of the USACE reported that natural refill for Lake Winnebago has begun. The ice has become rotten around the edges and the lake is rising due to snow melt runoff in the basin. Currently, lake levels are just below long-term average. Ms. Marie Strum of the USACE added that as of today the lake level is 2.12 ft on the Oshkosh Datum. Target water levels for the spring are 2.4 – 2.7 by May 1st and 2.7 – 3.0 by June 1st.
6. **Panel Discussion.** Mr. Ross of the USACE briefly explained the panel discussion procedure.

Mr. Techlow of the WDNR began the panel discussion with concerns about the lake ecosystem and the negative effects that rapid increases in water levels have on aquatic plants. From the WDNR's stand point, maintaining a lower water level in early spring and gradually raising the levels in mid to late spring would help enhance aquatic plant life that serves as vital fish and wildlife habitat.

Mr. Bob Stark of the Fox River Navigation Authority expressed the importance of achieving and maintaining a balance between water levels, boating interests and plant growth. All these factors are beneficial to the surrounding area's economic activity and growth. Mr. Stark also mentioned that he is concerned with the effect that low water levels have on boating safety and access. The right balance needs to be achieved to keep the local economy growing.

Mr. John Supple, a local businessman, agreed with Mr. Stark that improper water levels can have damaging effects on the local economy.

Mr. Frank Kreiger of Neenah Paper, Inc. expressed concern about the potential effects gate operations can have at their plant. Gate changes are made using a contract service and require a day advance notice. He also mentioned that opening all nine needle gates near the paper plant can cause flooding in their basement. In the past, the Corps has worked with Neenah Paper to only open seven gates when possible to avoid this problem. Mr. Kreiger expressed interest in continuing to keep open dialogue with the Corps to avoid opening all nine gates.

Mr. Skip Palermo of the Appleton Yacht Club stated that water levels directly affect boating activities in the Lower Fox River. He is concerned with rapidly changing water levels and the effect that high flows out of Menasha can have on boating down river at Appleton. Due to the record precipitation and very high releases from Winnebago last year, Appleton Yacht Club now must rebuild its reputation as a great place to boat. He would like to avoid the problems

experienced last year, but understands that conditions last year were beyond the Corps' control. Mr. Palermo expressed support for the overall job the Corps is doing on balancing the many issues involved in managing Lake Winnebago water levels.

Mr. Rob Elliot of Fish and Wildlife Services (FWS) mentioned the importance of maintaining a minimum water flow and level on the Lower Fox River downstream of De Pere Dam. This is where sturgeon spawning, egg incubation and hatching occur. It is advantageous to maintain a minimum flow of 4,000 cfs at De Pere Dam. Mr. Larry Thompson of FWS reported that the spawning season runs from April 15th thru June 15th. This spawning window includes spawning and larval migration. To maintain adequate water for spawning season there must be an allowance for water to flow over the spillway on the east side of the dam and no decrease in water levels after spawning. If there are problems with maintaining water levels and the USACE requires lower flows, 3,500 cfs may be acceptable. Ms. Strum conveyed that there is no reason to believe that maintaining 4000 cfs is not achievable at this point in time. Both parties agreed that close communication regarding basin conditions, expected outflows, and spawning should be maintained.

Mr. Joe Laux, Mayor of Menasha, mentioned that opening five gates creates hazardous conditions upriver of the Menasha Dam within the Menasha channel. It would be great if management of the water levels can avoid this situation. He also stated that during the summer months, when lake temperatures reach 78 degrees Fahrenheit and the gates are closed, algae grows on the lake resulting in problems with algae blooms. Mayor Laux suggested possibly leaving one gate open at the Menasha Dam during the summer months to help wash out algae. Mayor Laux would like to achieve a better gate opening balance between Menasha and Neenah Dams. Mr. Ross added that one of the Corps' goals is to equalize flows between both rivers. Ms. Strum noted that the Corps works with the city, when necessary, to open a gate for short periods of time in the summer to alleviate algae problems. However, keeping a gate open in the summer could drawdown the lake level, negatively impacting boating conditions on Lake Winnebago.

Mr. Gomm of Kaukauna Utilities stated that constant flows on the Lower Fox River helps in their operations. Furthermore, maintaining flow between 4,000 – 6,000 cfs provides optimal power generation. He would like to see flows similar to what have been occurring over the last few months. Mr. Gomm noted that the Corps' strategy to drawdown Lake Winnebago below 1.68 ft Oshkosh Datum this winter helped maintain constant flow, was helpful for Kaukauna Utilities' operations, and was good water level management.

Mr. Dave Kuharski of Fond du Lac Yacht Club expressed that their company is directly affected by low water levels. The southern portion of the lake is shallow and winds from the south can cause further drops in water levels. Ms. Strum

added that water levels at Fond du Lac are very susceptible to wind effects and can change rapidly. She informed everyone on the conference call that it is important to check the Corps' website for the most current levels at Fond du Lac. Strong winds can cause problems for safe navigation. Mr. Kuharski concluded this discussion by stating that he would like to see higher water levels to promote safe boating activity.

Mr. Steve Brand of Oshkosh Public Works (OPW) is mainly concerned with the city's water intake, which can be affected by lower water levels. OPW is not really affected by water level fluctuations and have had no problems with lake levels recently.

Mr. Chad Casper of Winnebago County Land & Water Management would like to see water levels remain around 3.0 ft Oshkosh Datum. If water levels reach above 3.4 ft Oshkosh Datum, wind setup, waves and overtopping can cause erosion and compromise shore protection.

Mr. Jeff Christensen of Radke Contracting asked if water levels are raised slowly in the spring, is it possible to not reach a water level above 3.0 ft Oshkosh Datum by summer and in the event of a dry spring, is there a chance that there may not be adequate water? Ms. Strum mentioned that it is highly unlikely to miss summer navigation water levels. Inflows and outflows are constantly monitored to insure appropriate adjustments are made to keep water levels within target ranges.

Mr. Eugene McLeod of Calumet County Land & Water Management suggested an increase in USACE and WDNR educational efforts to the public on how and why water levels are regulated. It was agreed by all that this could be beneficial for future communication.

Ms. Gloria Nelson of Wisconsin Recreational Boaters Association stated that she wants to have a minimum water level of 3.2 ft Oshkosh Datum for the entire navigation season. She stated that anything below 3.0 ft Oshkosh Datum is devastating to commercial enterprises on or off the water. In addition, Ms. Nelson stated that her association is concerned with pollution from runoff and its effect on algae blooms. Ms. Nelson stated that algae blooms are more prevalent near agricultural surroundings.

Mr. Rudebeck expressed two concerns: water quality and fish and wildlife habitat. He further stated that there has been a tremendous loss of habitat. This is primarily due to water level fluctuations, nutrient imbalances in the water basin, and depleted aquatic vegetation. Furthermore, the algae blooms that have been seen in recent years can be linked to the fluctuating water levels that have depleted the wetlands that used to filter out the nutrients that cause blooms. The only way to mitigate the nutrient imbalance is by growing vegetation in the upper lakes and maintaining lower water levels; unfortunately, the focus of water level management is to benefit navigation, which kills vegetation and compromises

water quality. Mr. Rudebeck also mentioned that the Fox-Wolf River system attracts professional fisherman from all over the country, which significantly boosts the local economy. Destruction of fish habitat could jeopardize the sport fishing industry.

7. **Open Discussion.** Mr. Palermo of Appleton Yacht Club is concerned about whether the reconstruction of the Oak Street Bridge and increase in additional slips will pose safety issues as they pertain to the operation of the Neenah Dam. Mr. Kreiger of Neenah Paper, Inc stated that the reconstruction and additional slips shouldn't pose any safety hazards. Ms. Strum noted that the Wisconsin Department of Transportation (WDOT) has worked with the Corps to minimize effects on Lake Winnebago water level operations due to construction.

Ms. Carla Kramer of International Paper expressed the need for constant flow achievement downriver at Kaukauna. She stated that flow rates below 1,200 cfs create problems in meeting discharge permit requirements. They would prefer flow rates to be maintained at or above 1500 cfs in the Lower Fox.

Ms. Nelson of Wisconsin Recreational Boater's Association advised that economic impacts and economic data need to be analyzed as they pertain to water level impacts on the local economy. She would like to see the Corps look beyond just ecosystem impacts and perform an economic study to gain a better understanding of this issue. The study needs to establish boating economic impacts and industrial economic impacts. Mr. Ross of the USACE mentioned that the Corps has no funding for an economic study. The Marshall Order directs the Corps to operate the project for flood control and safe navigation. If a private interest group wishes to pursue an economic study, the Corps could potentially review it and use the information in setting on regulation strategies.

Ms. Nelson invited representatives from the hydroelectric and paper companies to contact her to discuss loss of productivity, loss of revenue, and other issues associated with water levels.

8. **Wrap-up session.** Mr. Ross stated that the next the regulation meeting would be held in mid-October, 2005.
9. **Conference Call Adjourned**

Participants:

USACE:

Phil Ross / Detroit
Marie Strum / Detroit
Dave Barilovich / Detroit
Keith Kompoltowicz / Detroit
Mike O'Bryan / Detroit
Jim Bonetti / Kewaunee Area Office
Bob Stanick / Fox River Sub Office

Other Agencies:

Art Techlow, Department of Natural Resources
Bob Stark, Fox River Navigation Authority
Frank Kreiger, Neenah Paper, Inc
Rob Elliot, Fish & Wildlife Service
Larry Thompson, Fish & Wildlife Service
Joe Laux, Mayor of Menasha
Bruce Gomm, Kaukauna Utilities
Steve Brand, Osh Kosh Public Works
Chad Casper, Winnebago County Land & Water Management
Carla Kramer, International Paper
Jeff Christensen, Radke Contracting
Eugene McLeod, Calumet County Land & Water Management

Citizens and Groups:

John Supple, Local Business Owner
Skip Palermo, Appleton Yacht Club
Dave Kuharski, Fond du Lac Yacht Club
Dan Rudebeck, Lake Poygan Sportsman's Club
Gloria Nelson, Wisconsin Recreational Boaters Association, Inc.